ReadingGroupGuides
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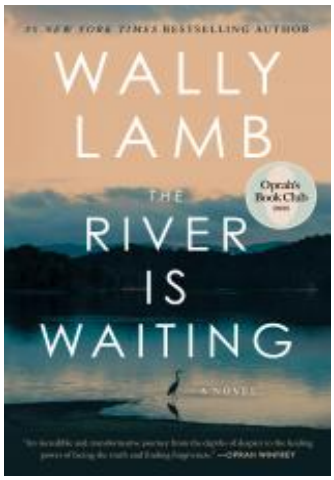
The River Is Waiting

by Wally Lamb



About the Book

From Wally Lamb, the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of two Oprah Book Club picks --- SHE'S COME UNDONE and I KNOW THIS MUCH IS TRUE --- comes the propulsive story of a young father who, after an unbearable tragedy, reckons with the possibility of atonement for the unforgivable.

Corby Ledbetter is struggling. New fatherhood, the loss of his job, and a growing secret addiction have thrown his marriage to his beloved Emily into a tailspin. And that?s before he causes the tragedy that tears the family apart. Sentenced to prison, Corby struggles to survive life on the inside, where he bears witness to frightful acts of brutality but also experiences small acts of kindness and elemental kinship with a prison librarian who sees his light and some of his fellow offenders, including a tender-hearted cellmate and a troubled teen desperate for a role model.

Buoyed by them and by his mother?s enduring faith in him, Corby begins to transcend the boundaries of his confinement, sustained by his hope that mercy and reconciliation still might be possible. Can his crimes ever be forgiven by those he loves?

Discussion Guide

1. Corby is a deeply flawed yet sympathetic character. Does his character challenge your preconceived notions about morality and empathy, particularly within the context of his life decisions? How does he evolve throughout the novel?

2. The Wequonnoc River serves as a profound symbol within the narrative. Beyond its role in the story, reflect on the river's significance as a metaphor for life's continuous flow and transformations. What does the river represent to the novel?s characters?

3. Consider Emily?s guilt over her last conversation with Corby. How does her struggle with forgiveness parallel larger

themes within the story? Do you believe forgiveness is essential for personal growth?

4. The plot touches on systemic injustices within the prison system, particularly with Corby?s experience with officers Anselmo and Piccardy. How does the narrative critique societal structures, and what insights does it offer into the complexities and failures of the justice system?

5. Consider how addiction and mental health are portrayed within the novel. How do these challenges impact Corby?s choices and relationships? In what ways does the story prompt a deeper understanding of the societal and personal dimensions of these issues?

6. The mural Corby painted in the prison library becomes a symbol of his legacy. What does the mural mean to Emily and Maisie? Discuss how art can become a form of resistance and hope.

7. Manny plays a pivotal role in helping Emily reconcile with Corby?s death. What does Manny?s survival and his eventual contact with Emily suggest about the enduring connections between people?

8. Grief is a central theme in the novel. Evaluate the portrayal of mourning and the diverse coping mechanisms embodied by various characters. Which characters? journeys resonated most with your own experiences, and why?

9. The Law of Threefold Return, associated with Wiccan beliefs, is woven into the story. Discuss its thematic relevance and how its principles of karmic justice influence the narrative's outcomes and character arcs.

10. Solomon's interactions with Corby highlight themes of mentorship, guidance and moral complexity. Do you think Solomon benefitted from Corby?s influence? Why or why not?

11. Emily is at a crossroads in her life, torn between her grief for Corby and her new relationship with Bryan. How does she balance these two aspects of her life? Discuss the psychological and emotional intricacies of her choices. Is it possible to have new beginnings when so much of your life is tied to the past?

12. The novel?s structure includes multiple perspectives and spans several years. How does this structure enhance or challenge your understanding of the characters and their journeys?

13. The inclusion of the COVID-19 pandemic adds an additional layer to the story's gravity. Discuss how the pandemic context affects the characters, particularly Corby and Manny, and highlights broader themes of vulnerability and systemic challenges.

14. How are themes of memory and legacy woven throughout the book? How do Corby?s artistic creations, such as his stone and mural, help Emily and Maisie remember him? Is there anything in your life that serves as a symbol for remembrance or legacy?

15. The novel explores the complexities of father-son relationships, including themes of legacy, expectations and reconciliation. How do you interpret the relationship dynamics between fathers and sons in this story? Are there moments or struggles that resonate with relationships you?ve observed or experienced in your own life?

16. Imagine you're in charge of casting a film adaptation of THE RIVER IS WAITING. Who would you pick to play Corby and Emily, and why? What qualities or traits of these characters should the actors bring to life on screen? Are there other actors for the book?s additional characters that spring to mind?

Author Bio

Wally Lamb is the author of six *New York Times* bestselling novels: I?LL TAKE YOU THERE, WE ARE WATER, WISHIN? AND HOPIN?, THE HOUR I FIRST BELIEVED, I KNOW THIS MUCH IS TRUE and SHE?S COME UNDONE. Lamb also edited COULDN'T KEEP IT TO MYSELF and I'LL FLY AWAY, two volumes of essays from students in his writing workshop at York Correctional Institution, a women?s prison in Connecticut, where he was a volunteer facilitator for 20 years. Lamb lives in Connecticut with his wife, Christine, and they have three sons.

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